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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS (HIRONIMUS) AND EUR/FO (PANDITH)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SMIG](#) [AU](#)  
SUBJECT: MUSLIM INTEGRATION IN AUSTRIA

Classified By: Political Economic Counsellr J. Dean Yap for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d)

1.(U)Summary: Austria is home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the EU and although many Muslims are integrating well into Austrian Society, many others are not. Some immigrants do not gain fluency in German, and have limited interaction within Austrian society. At the same time, Austrians generally do not view their country as an immigration society and do not readily accept non-European immigrants into their communities. Muslim immigrants generally feel discriminated against at the workplace and in daily life. Although experts warn that the frustration and disillusionment of second and third generation immigrants could lead to extremism, polls indicate that Austrian Muslims would like to integrate into mainstream society. Despite the long history of immigration into Austria, the government lacks a national strategy to deal with this issue. Municipal and provincial governments recognize the problem and have introduced policies and programs to facilitate integration. The Islamic Faith Community (Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft) also plays a crucial role in facilitating integration, although this organization is also plagued by charges that it is affiliated with extremist groups and its leadership is not representative of the diverse Muslim population living in Austria. End Summary

A Large Community; Islam Officially Recognized  
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12. (U) In the 1960s, Austria instituted a guest worker program to deal with its labor shortage during a boom period in the economy. Workers from Turkey constituted the second largest share of guest laborers, after immigrants from the former Yugoslavia. Austria has one of the highest proportions of Muslim immigrants in the EU. It is home to 400,000 Muslim immigrants, 4-5% of the population, two-thirds of whom are non-citizens. The Muslim immigrant community consists mainly of Turks and Bosnians, but Austria is also home to significant numbers of immigrants from Arab countries. The provinces with the largest percentage of Muslims include Vorarlberg (8.4), Vienna (7.8), and Salzburg (4.5). The largest absolute number is in Vienna, with an estimated 121,000 Muslims.

13. (U) In Austria, the state officially recognizes some religions and funds their religious education. Under this system, Islam is officially recognized in Austria and is considered the third religion in the country after Catholicism and Protestantism. The "Islam Law," passed in 1912 (and revived in 1978) gives Muslims various rights and privileges, including the right to organize and manage their community affairs independently as public corporations. In 1989, the government amended this law to recognize all Islamic theological schools.

The State of Integration

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¶4. (C)While many Muslim immigrants are integrating well into Austrian society, many others are not. Integration can be partially measured in terms of frequency of interaction between the non-immigrant and immigrant groups. Government studies cite limited interaction between Austrian citizens and Muslim immigrants. According to an Interior Ministry study, 69 percent of males and 76 percent of females have no contact with Muslims, while only 12 percent of respondents had frequent contact with Muslims. Another major problem that limits interaction is segregation in housing, argues integration expert Valeria Heuberger, researcher and lecturer at the University of Vienna. Much of this is the legacy of the guest worker period, when immigrants came to Austria seeking economic opportunities, but not intending to stay permanently. Guest workers were not entitled to live in public housing and many settled in low-income areas of the city, mostly in the outlying districts. This self-segregation remains to this day. In certain districts of Vienna, for instance, immigrants comprise over a quarter of the residents. In 2005, the City of Vienna took action to reverse this trend by allowing immigrants to reside in public housing projects throughout the city.

¶5. (U)Muslim immigrants perceive widespread discrimination by Austrians. Many complain of being denied educational opportunities and facing discrimination in hiring. Statistics show that a large proportion of students in the special-needs and vocational schools are from non-Austrian backgrounds, due primarily to their deficient German language skills. This segregation of immigrants within the educational system limits the jobs and careers available to them. Although the education level among Turkish Muslim immigrants is rising, especially among second and third generation immigrants, it continues to fall short of the level among non-immigrants. By attending vocational schools, many immigrants land jobs that are vulnerable to economic downturns, and unemployment rates tend to be higher for these lesser-skilled professions. Indeed, 20 percent of Muslim immigrants are unemployed, compared to 4.9 percent of the population as a whole. According to a recent poll, nearly half of Muslim immigrants believe they are discriminated against based on dress, appearance, or name.

#### A Skeptical Public

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¶6. (U)Though 15 percent of Austria's population is foreign-born, Austrians do not conceive of their country as an immigrant society. Rather, they tend to view immigrants as temporary residents, not as true Austrians who share their values. In a recent survey, 57 percent of Austrians said they fear that Islam is a threat to fundamental Austrian values. Many Austrians also view Muslim immigrants as unwilling to integrate into society and feel that immigrants abuse the social welfare system without contributing to society. Moreover, working class Austrians feel their jobs are threatened by immigrants, who tend to work for lower wages than Austrians will accept.

¶7. (U)Immigrants from some Muslim countries tend to integrate more easily into Austrian society than others, according to Alexander Karakas of the NGO "Future Through Language". For instance, Bosnians tend to integrate better than those from Arab countries. Additionally, immigrants with a higher socio-economic background tend to integrate more readily than others.

#### Comment: Religion Not the Primary Factor

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¶8. (U)The relative difficulty of integration among various Muslim groups highlights the fact that religion is not the primary hurdle for successful integration. Rather, religion is only one of many factors affecting the cultural dissonance between the particular immigrant group and the accepting society. Other factors, such as socio-economic status,

educational level, and urban/rural background play as great of a role in determining how quickly or easily a group will adapt to the host country's customs and values.

#### Political Parties and the Media

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¶9. (C)The viewpoints of the Freedom and Green parties illustrate the range of attitudes held by Austrians regarding integration. On the one extreme, the Freedom Party exploits for political gain the fears and stereotypes of immigrants. During the 2006 election campaign, for instance, the party posed a series of anti-Islam political posters, playing on the fears of the working class. In a meeting with EmbOffs, Freedom Party City Counselor Vernika Matiassek stated the Freedom Party's position on integration: essentially, the onus for adaptation lies with the immigrants, who are obligated to embrace the language, laws, and values of Austria. The Party is against the building of mosques in Austria and favors a much more restrictive immigration policy in general.

¶10. (C)The Green Party takes a much more tolerant view of immigration, acknowledging that it is a fact of life in the globalized world. The Greens suggest a more holistic view of integration policy than merely offering German language programs, according to Green Party member Andreas Lepschi. They promote the creation of an affirmative action program to mitigate the ill effects of discrimination, for example. They also support bringing more individuals with immigrant backgrounds into the political sphere. The party's position is that society needs to do much more to promote the integration of its immigrants.

¶11. (U)Unfortunately, the media's focus on the Muslim community or the issue of integration is very intermittent. Usually something sensational needs to occur for a story to make headlines. For instance, a prominent politician makes some populist remarks or takes a radical stand on an issue such as the outlawing of headscarves or mosque-building. One possible reason is the lack of Muslim journalists in mainstream Austria media. In any case, these issues generally do not get the continuous attention that their relative importance should warrant.

#### Prospects for Extremism

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¶12. (C)Some elements of Muslim life in Austria render the country a potential breeding ground for extremism. Integration expert Attila Dincer warns that this threat exists primarily with the second and third generations of immigrants. As descendants of immigrants, these individuals have grown up in Austria, but do not feel accepted in Austrian society. At the same time, they are also alienated from the country of their parents' origin. Thus, they lack a social identity. Additionally, these second generation immigrants are highly frustrated and disillusioned. They feel that they have done everything expected of them; they have learned German and worked hard to get a good education, only to find that they cannot get a good job and do not feel at home in Austria. These disaffected youth are fodder on whom fundamentalist Imams prey with their messages of hate and intolerance.

¶13. (U)On the other hand, polling data tend to suggest that Austrian Muslims today have little interest in extremism. Second and third generation immigrants are relatively more secular than their parents and overwhelmingly reject extremism and terrorism. While many continue to practice the basic tenets of Islam, they also have a strong desire to interact with and participate in Austrian society.

#### Integration Policies

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¶14. (U) Because guest workers were viewed, by both the government and the workers themselves, as temporary

residents, no thought was given to integration. The GoA began only a few years ago to consider integration policies, but there is currently neither a federal mandate nor national strategy that deals with integration.

¶15. (U)At a minimum, the government views the acquisition of the German language as a key tool for integration. Immigrants and family members are required to attend 300 hours of language instruction in order to receive a residence permit. However, proficiency is not tested following the completion of the training, so many immigrants merely attend the classes, without gaining fluency in the language.

#### Integration at the Local Level

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¶16. (U)Local governments handle all other aspects of integration. Municipal Department 17, established in 2004 as part of the Vienna City Council, deals with issues of integration and diversity, mainly focusing on housing, youth, education, jobs, social issues, and health care. The City Council is in the process of creating a diversity monitoring system to monitor the progress of integration and the effectiveness of courses and programs.

¶17. (U)Local governments also fully fund or sponsor various projects by NGOs, which play a large role in fostering integration. The Vorarlberg provincial government, for instance, funds the NGO "Okay-Living Together" (OKAY) to devise strategies for the integration of foreigners and to counsel communities on how to address integration issues. Strategies include projects for German language courses as well as social events designed to increase interaction between the immigrant and non-immigrant communities. OKAY concentrates on establishing networks of people and organizations involved in integration and provides a platform for exchanging experiences and best practices among the communities in Vorarlberg. This bottom-up approach is exemplified by the city of Dornbirn, which has had in place both integration guidelines as well as an integration department for the past five years. Other towns with high percentages of immigrants are now emulating the Dornbirn example.

#### Official Representation

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¶18. (U)Austrians, both Muslim and non-Muslim, do often point to one dimension of public policy that they believe gives Austria an advantage in integrating Muslim immigrants: the long-standing official recognition of Islam as a religion and of the "Islamic Faith Community" as Islam's voice and representative in Austria. With the rising number of Muslim immigrants in the early 70s, Arab academics and students lobbied to reinstate the 1912 "Islam Law," which had lapsed in the aftermath of World War One. In 1979, the Muslim community regained its status as an official religious society and the "Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Oesterreich" was established as the official representational body of the Muslim community in Austria. The Glaubensgemeinschaft is endowed with the authority to determine the curriculum of Islamic religious instruction in public schools as well as matters of finance for private schools, including the Islamic Teachers Academy.

¶19. (U)Since the initial lobbying for recognition was vanguarded by prominent Arabs, they naturally assumed leadership roles in the newly-established Glaubensgemeinschaft. However, many Muslims (especially Turks and Bosnians) feel that the monopolization of the leadership by Arabs is unrepresentative of the diverse Austrian Muslim community. Indeed, some individuals have stated a desire to create parallel organizations to the Glaubensgemeinschaft. Critics of the organization have also charged it with having affiliations with radical Islamists -- charges that the Glaubensgemeinschaft vehemently denies.

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